

## Public meetings – virtual and real

*Updated after 25 March 2021*

When can we hold meetings in real life again?

*At the moment, and according to government advice, it will after 21 June 2021.*

Does that mean we can keep meeting virtually until then?

*No. The legislation that allows virtual meetings expires on May 7, and the regulations that originally permitted virtual meetings were not renewed on 25 March. This is a serious matter and CALC are asking parish councils to respond to a survey being conducted by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. NALC (the National Association for Local Councils) are considering an appeal to the high court to keep the current arrangements for longer.*

So, what will happen from 7 May until 20 June?

*This is unclear. The council may wish to argue that meeting in real life is a necessary choice in order to maintain business continuity. If suitable premises are available (that is, will the usual meeting place allow the council to meet there), we can carry out a risk assessment and enable a public meeting to be held.*

Why couldn't we have met like this last year?

*Because last year, legislation allowed virtual meetings to take place. If this option is removed, then the only choice you have is to hold a meeting in real life.*

If we meet in real life again (with restrictions), how do we manage public participation?

*Strictly, you have to allow as many people as wish to, to attend a public meeting. Having to exclude people from the public meeting prevents open access and transparency in your work, so the rule is that you should allow any number of people to attend. However, CALC's approach to this strict interpretation has softened since last year. Their view now is that you should take a proportionate approach to this, and make arrangements for full public access.*

*However – if you knew in advance that an agenda item was likely to attract public interest with a high turnout, you might consider either postponing that item until after 20 June, or if that isn't possible, to hold a separate meeting on the topic alone, or explore alternative ways to manage the business (for example, online consultation, telephone conference)*

What happens if our regular meeting place is closed and won't allow us to use it?

*You could hold the meeting out of doors. That will need careful organising, but it can be done.*

Is there an alternative? The weather might prevent us meeting out of doors.

*You could go back to the kind of virtual meeting that you're used to having (either online or by telephone) and which you used to have last Spring before the enabling legislation came into force. However, without the proper legislation in place, this won't be a legal public meeting. However, you have voted to extend the Clerk's delegated powers so they are able to make decisions (after proper consultation with councillors), and these decisions will be legal.*

Is this affected by the elections on May 6?

*Yes. The annual meeting of the parish council must be held within 14 days of the fourth day after the elections. New councils start their work on Monday 10 May (the old council and councillors are still mandated to manage the parish up to Sunday 9 May), so you must hold your annual meeting before 24 May.*

What is the simplest way out of this if the legislation does not change?

*Have your May public meeting in real life, after the Clerk has carried out a risk assessment of the premises. If the potential risks can be managed, be aware that some councillors may still feel unsafe or be unwilling to attend. This will need careful management. This meeting may be limited to the election of Chair, Vice Chair and other councillor posts and the acceptance of Declaration of Acceptance of Office. Any other business can be postponed to a later date and managed under the Clerk's delegated powers.*

7 April 2021